

# In Conversation: Rod MacRae

2001-05-10

Mark Foss

The 20th century has witnessed a massive growth in urban populations. In 1990, one-third of the world's people lived in cities of one million or more. As well, hunger and malnutrition are on the increase worldwide, as the global food system fails to satisfy the growing demand of the urban consumer. [\*For Hunger-proof Cities: Sustainable Urban Food Systems\*](#) is the first book to fully explore food security from an urban perspective. Mark Foss recently interviewed co-editor Rod MacRae about this publication for *IDRC Reports Online*.

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**One of your book's goals is to encourage the development of "a conceptual and practical framework for sustainable urban food systems." Do you feel you've succeeded?**

Yes and No. We're really in the early stages of developing a conceptual model for sustainable urban food systems, especially in a western world setting. What this book does is advance the development of such a conceptual framework. At some point down the road, there will be much more of a consensual sense of what that actually looks like.

**Why has urban food security dropped off the agenda?**

I'm not sure whether it has ever been on the agenda, at least in a western world setting. In the South, in some quarters, it's been a pressing issue as people flock to urban areas, and as the urban infrastructure, especially of large cities, begins to crumble. In a western setting, I don't think it's ever been a priority except during war time. Canada had a Department of Food, or a Ministry of Food, during the Second World War. Ensuring domestic food procurement for the population was a key priority, as well as ensuring food for the troops.

**Some people are saying that globalization is the solution to food security. Some are saying it's the problem. What's your view?**

Globalization is a huge problem. At a conceptual level, globalization is breaking some of the fundamental rules of ecology. You can't continually export materials out of one region and import materials into another region without negative environmental consequences ranging from the drain of nutrients to the introduction of exotic pests. At an economic level, it's also a disaster. Globalization, in combination with the concentration of wealth and power in the agrifood sector, means that the farm sector has no control over the price it pays for inputs or the prices it receives for outputs. That of course has negative ramifications for everything from government budgets to

the viability of rural communities. Having said that, I'm not against trade, but to paraphrase a colleague of mine, trade philosophy should be "feed the family, trade the leftovers." Focus on meeting domestic demand, and ensuring that you're producing food that nourishes the population.

**It sounds like there has to be more balance between local and global needs. But even within the local framework, there are also a lot of competing interests.**

For sure. One of the big problems is that the food and agriculture sector doesn't really have a planning dimension. Let's say you want to promote urban food production. How do you do that and not compete with your own domestic farmers whose primary market is an urban area? You can't just say: "Let's attract some entrepreneurs into the city and get them growing food, and let their own sense of the market determine what they're going to grow." That could have a very negative effect on your own local farm base. Instead, you've got to say: "What are you trying to achieve here?" In Toronto's case, during the Ontario growing season, 95 percent of the vegetables imported come from California. So strategically, it makes much more sense if you're designing an urban food production program to say: "What are we going to grow locally that can substitute for what we're importing from California? And how do we create the market mechanisms that will ensure that the folks who were buying food from California during the Ontario growing season are now going to be buying something else?"

**What else should an urban food policy address?**

There are a bunch of issues. One of them is: "What do people actually have access to?" A lot of low income folks often congregate in areas of cities where housing is inexpensive. Often, there's a much higher percentage of convenience stores than retail stores in low income areas. The retail sector is not really interested in serving the needs of low income people. They're not going to make any money off of them. Low income people are also usually far less mobile. If a middle or upper income earner doesn't like the choices available for shopping, they just jump in their car and go somewhere else. That isn't necessarily an option for low income folks. So there's this key question about the way in which the design of an urban area, access to quality food outlets, and people's knowledge and understanding about what is nourishing come into play.

**Given the problem of access to food, it makes sense to look at the potential for urban agriculture. But a lot of community groups — from Lusaka, Zambia to Hamilton, Ontario — have encountered resistance. Why?**

There are two main reasons. Institutional players are notoriously slow to adapt what they do to meet a new kind of demand. For example, a lot of municipal governments are slow to recognize that a piece of land, with certain kinds of supports, could be very useful for urban food production. But in another way, the players in the dominant system recognize urban agriculture as a challenge to the way they've done business, so they will either fight it or try to co-opt it.

**In this book, you argue for a new approach to food security in Canada at both the provincial and federal levels that would integrate agriculture, food, and health principles. Do you see any movement towards greater cooperation?**

There are small signs of progress, but there have been no major improvements. After the World Food Summit in Rome, the federal government put together an interdepartmental committee to develop an action plan. Well, the federal action plan is very weak, but this external group still functions. And there are certain good, talented folks in the system who are trying to resuscitate both collaboration between departments and with civil society to advance this action plan. But it's a terrifically uphill battle. It's a structural problem. It's a budgetary problem. It's obviously a question

of political will. It's the fact that to really advance food security in this country is to fundamentally challenge the way the food and agriculture system is organized, and the kind of policies and programs that governments have had in place for the past 40 or 50 years.

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## **The Editors**

**Mustafa Koc** is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, Canada, where he co-directs the Centre for Studies in Food Security.

**Rod MacRae** is a full-time consultant, working primarily for Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are promoting greater health and environmental sustainability in the food and agriculture sector. He is also a former director of the Toronto Food Policy Council, Toronto, Canada.

**Luc J.A. Mougeot** is Senior Program Specialist at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. Dr Mougeot leads IDRC's program in urban agriculture: Cities Feeding People.

**Jennifer Welsh** is Professor and Director of the School of Nutrition, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, Canada.

## **The Book**

[For Hunger-proof Cities: Sustainable Urban Food Systems](#)

edited by Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae, Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Jennifer Welsh, IDRC/Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson Polytechnic University, 1999.